

Mothers and babies caught in the cracks

It is not uncommon for government policies to contradict each other. But there can be few more outstanding cases of the left hand not knowing what the right hand is up to, than the Labor Government's current stance on paid maternity leave for its employees and its desire to increase the state's population.

The government is opposing an increase in paid maternity leave to 14 weeks for its own employees. This is the level offered by NSW and Victorian Governments and the level internationally recognised as the minimum paid period necessary for a decent rest for women after birth. The government is willing to pay 8 weeks. This is a big improvement on the current 4 weeks or the scrooge-like 2 weeks it provided for the first time from 1999 – exactly 80 years after the International Labor Organisation recommended a paid break for working women. But being late to the game is no excuse for deciding to stay on the backlines. Especially when the game has changed so much. Labour markets need women – and government employers more than most. The South Australian government increasingly depends on women: over 63 per cent of state public sector employees are women. But it resists properly renovating its employment arrangements to meet the feminisation of the workforce.

South Australia is likely to face the problems of an aging workforce and a tightening labour market earlier than most other states. An 8 week payment would leave South Australia's public servants near the bottom of the government pack at a time when all the focus is on upward improvements.

Fortunately many other employers are not so backward. The federal government has been paying 12 weeks maternity leave for 32 years - since 1973. Holden's now offer their employees 14 weeks paid maternity leave – and they have reaped the benefits, with almost all women employees now returning to work after having a baby compared to only 65 percent previously. Banks and financial services along with many businesses are following suit. They know that they need to send a signal to potential women employees: we value your skills and years of service and we recognise and support the fact that you might have a family while remaining an effective and valued employee.

All of these employers recognise that very significant health and welfare benefits flow to mothers and babies when they can be assured of decent rest, recovery, and bonding time around birth. These health and welfare benefits do not stop at 2 or 4 or 8 weeks. Indeed they do not stop at 14. But a paid break for 14 weeks means more recovery and rest with each week, a decent shot at breast feeding, and some recovery from the extreme sleep deprivation that most new mothers know too well. Given that two-thirds of families with children now rely on two incomes, paid leave is a sure way of helping women and babies get the rest they need. This is especially true for families with fewer resources. At present many women return to work more quickly than they would wish because of financial pressure – especially those in low income families.

Not all employers are in the position of being able to afford 14 weeks paid maternity leave especially where they employ large numbers of women. But the case is much stronger for the Government. Not only is it disproportionately dependent on women workers, it will save money on recruitment and retraining and in the health system

through healthier mothers and babies, as well as attract new employees to the labour market, help fend off population decline, and generate growth. The state government can either send a signal of support for working women and their families by matching the increasingly common level of 14 weeks paid maternity leave for its own workers, or hang on to its status as national delinquent and the 'family unfriendly' Government. It can either fall through the cracks in its own policy or fix them.

Barbara Pocock was a witness at the industrial relations hearings on paid maternity leave in the SA public sector on 28th February and 1st March, and is a Research Fellow in Social Sciences at the University of Adelaide.